

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 530

CS 502 306

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TITLE The Semiotic Function in the Performance of Literature.
PUB DATE Dec 75
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (61st, Houston, Texas, December 1975)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Interpretive Reading; *Literature Appreciation; Perception; Production Techniques; *Rhetoric; Rhetorical Criticism; *Semiotics; Speech Communication; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS Audience Response

ABSTRACT

The interpretation semiotic system that governs interpretation performance pertains to a distinct code of stylized conventions and includes all of the visual and auditory aspects that are generally salient to the characteristics of a performance. The selection of a particular convention for the interpretation of a specific text involves an act of deductive judgment on the part of the performer. Although skilled performers appear to make these choices unconsciously, the interpretation semiotic system is in fact learned by the methods of oral tradition, face to face. The necessity of direct contact among teachers and learners causes interpretation conventions to cluster into geographic, institutional, and cultural semiotic subsystems that are constantly being modified. Because the percepts of interpretation performance are always modified by the mental imagery of audience members, the performance of literature is characterized by a perceptual ratio between the conventions used and the perceptions of the audience. Using suggestion in a performance is not appropriate because it obscures the meaning of the literary text. (MAI)

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THE SEMIOTIC FUNCTION IN THE PERFORMANCE OF LITERATURE

by

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Presented for the Debut Program, Interpretation Division,
Speech Communication Association Convention, Houston,
December, 1975

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This paper is being submitted in the hope that it can better define, or at least mediate, a long-standing polemic concerning the performance of literature. There exists a particular label in interpretation circles which seems to set off explosive reactions in some quarters; advocates doggedly cling to it, if cringing a bit in anticipation of its reception, and the term crops up regularly among students, who, without calumny, attempt to formulate theoretical postulates about the art of performing literature. The label: suggestion, a term that keeps rising like the phoenix from the ashes of each generation of interpretation teachers. Such persistence deserves closer investigation. With a plea for your suspended judgment, let us reexamine this tattered label. What are the features of the phenomenon, suggestion, as experienced by performers of literature and audience members?

The performance of literature has its own aesthetics, and one aspect of this aesthetics is a distinct code of stylized conventions. Along with dance, mime, and even such nonaesthetic activities as gaming, interpretation conventions may be classified under what Ray Birdwhistell maintains is a "derived system."¹ Birdwhistell speculates that it is not possible to study derived systems as part of the primary communication system. Derived systems are autonomous codes, each connected to the primary system in a unique way, and each passed on to learners by a special means. Each derived system is a self-contained schema of signs constituting a separate semiotic system.

Interpretation semiotics includes the entire perceptual scene of interpretation performance. It is comprised of all visual percepts--performers, audience members, and objects, movements, and postures, and it includes auditory percepts such as music and sound effects and any

vocal phenomena that are not specific to a literary text. Stylized movement, mine, or gestures that incorporate into the performance the manuscript or properties are units of the semiotic code. Although the intonational elements of pitch, stress, and juncture with their kinesic counterpoint and the kinesic accompaniment to silence are partly related to the specific text, they are an acquired code, and it is possible that they are synchronized somewhat differently for presentational purposes. And there may exist subcodes such as narrative posture² that vary by genre or rhetorical purpose. The semiotics of performed literature makes salient the characteristics of performance that can be generalized; the appropriateness of a particular convention for a specific text is another matter, an act of deductive judgement.

Several qualifications should be appended to the definition just advanced. Performers' idiosyncratic voice set--as affected by mood, body build, sex, and social status--and performers' idiosyncratic paralinguistic qualities do not belong to interpretation semiotics. Neither do autistic or random kinesic phenomena belong to the interpretation system. The elements of voice set, paralanguage, and kinesics that are inherent to interpretation semiotics are the attributes of voice and body that the performer selects from the primary system. Skillful performers become quite adept at selecting the most appropriate elements of voice and movement. Although skillful performers appear to make these choices unconsciously, it is possible that the selection has been coded and that the choices vary with different audiences and with different types of performers. Perhaps unwritten selection parameters constitute a rhetoric of interpretation. Leslie Irene Coger and Sharron Pelham³ have recently identified some kinesic

principles for group productions.

Performers and directors give the illusion of intuitively knowing the semiotics of interpretation, but long experience is required to manage such complex conventions as off-stage focus, character placement, or the synchronization of an anticipatory pause punctuated by head, eyebrow, and shoulder movement with a succeeding linguistic unit. The interpretation semiotic system is learned by the methods of oral tradition, face to face. The system is taught less well, and perhaps not at all, by textbooks alone. A live teacher and much observation are required, for it is not easy to learn again with modifications what one has been doing below the level of consciousness since the fourth year of life.

The necessity of direct contact among teachers and learners causes interpretation conventions to cluster into geographic, institutional, and cultural semiotic subsystems, but the subsystems are constantly being modified. Emphasis on the art of performance at interpretation festivals stimulates change and encourages experimentation. Another contribution to the modification of semiotic codes comes from the learners. Students' enthusiasm for literature in performance enriches the possibilities of interpretation conventions and keeps the teachers in touch with changing cultural perceptions of literature.

The interpretation semiotic system classifies a wide range of percepts. There is the traditional formula of performers using off-stage focus while standing at a podium upon which rests a manuscript. And there are complex group movements without podium or manuscript, using both on and off-stage focus, and perhaps including props, costumes, and scenery. The perceptual form of the text may vary from two or three-

dimensional concrete representation to speech in conjunction with open book to electronic transmission. This is the range of aesthetic conventions for the performance of literature, conventions which are variations upon the perceptual possibilities of audiences. They cannot be mistaken for rules. They should not be formed in response to extrinsic limitations, i.e., the rules of competitive events or the imperative to avoid theatre conventions. Nor does it follow that interpretation conventions are inappropriate on the grounds that they depart from tried and familiar conventions; conventions in their generic, semiotic sense may be rejected only if they exceed human perceptual possibilities. This is a rather elaborate way of explaining that audiences have to see and hear whatever the performers are doing and speaking, but there is a tendency to take for granted this fundamental basis of the art. If we lose sight of the perceptual base of interpretation, we fall into the error of convincing ourselves that aesthetic conventions are binding. The semiotic function demonstrates that they are arbitrary. William Wordsworth offers an analogy, warning us about:

. . . that false secondary power by which,
In weakness, we create distinctions, then
Deem that our puny boundaries are things
Which we perceive, and not which we have made.⁴

The function of percepts in the performance of literature defines the perceived, but that old habit, suggestion, will assert itself again until the aesthetic principle that governs percepts is described. Audience members make perception out of what they perceive. The percepts of interpretation performance are not assimilated as visual copies of the physical object; percepts are always modified by mental imagery. Rudolf Arnheim believes that this tie between the physical object and its imaginary correlate is "visual thinking."⁵ The phenomenon has

been well substantiated in psychological research as the Perky effect,⁶ and recent experiments undertaken by Sydney Segal⁷ demonstrate that a considerable part of what is commonly believed to be perception is really imaginal. We all have had the startling experience of mistaking percepts for perceptions: the face at the dark window turns into a bush, and the prone human form on the highway at night becomes a crumpled box.

During the performance of literature, the audience member is particularly subject to the pull of the perception end of the percept-perception continuum, because stories, novels, plays, and poetry are fictions. They occur only in the subjunctive by means of what Jean-Paul Sartre calls an attitude of the perceiver's consciousness. Sartre explains that "every object, whether it is present as an external perception or appears to intimate sense, can function as a present reality or as an image, depending on what center of reference has been chosen. The two worlds, real and imaginary, are composed of the same objects; only the grouping and interpretation of these objects varies."⁸ The audience member, constructing the fictional event by the synthesis of his consciousness, continues to watch the performer. If the perceiver shifts his center of reference to the performer, the performer becomes what Sartre terms a "physical image."⁹ By means of this peculiar reversal of perception, the fiction is now perceived on the performer.

Now we are ready for an operational definition of our old friend--or enemy--suggestion. The performance of literature is characterized by a perceptual ratio between performance percepts and their imaginative correlates as mutually established and maintained by performer and perceiver. Because percepts clarify and guide perception, the perceptual ratio cannot be established if percepts are hidden or obscure.

Nor can the perceptual ratio be maintained if performance percepts become too literal; for the perceiver will shift his center of reference back to present reality, destroying the fiction which is posited as not existing. Paradoxically, the perceiver makes credible what is incredible. But if some element in the semiotic code posits the fiction as truly existing, the physical image is destroyed. For example, an interpreter plans to actually smoke a cigarette during the indicated place for such action, but his management of the lighting and smoking is inept, and his audience knows that the performer is a nonsmoker. The character vanishes, and the performer becomes a naked percept, struggling to reoccupy the perceiver's image.

What constitutes clear percepts of the literary text and how these percepts can best be placed on a continuum from literal to physical image seem to be a productive issue for interpreters. Let's bury suggestion!

FOOTNOTES

¹Roy L. Birdwhistell, Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 113.

²I am indebted to David A. Williams for pointing out the possibility of narrative posture.

³Leslie Irene Coger and Sharron Henry Pelham, "Kinesics Applied to Interpreters Theatre," The Speech Teacher, 24 (1975), 91-99.

⁴William Wordsworth, The Prelude (1805), Book II, ed. J. C. Maxwell (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), p. 84.

⁵Rudolf Arnheim, Visual Thinking (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969).

⁶C. W. Perky, "An Experimental Study of Imagination," American Journal of Psychology, 21 (1910), 422-452.

⁷Sydney Joelson Segal, "Assimilation of a Stimulus in the Construction of an Image: The Perky Effect Revisited" in The Function and Nature of Imagery, ed. Peter W. Sheehan (New York: Academic Press, 1972), pp. 203-230.

⁸Jean-Paul Sartre, The Psychology of Imagination (1948; rpt. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1966), p. 25.

⁹Ibid., p. 29.